

A PAIR OF STEĆAKS FROM DONJA ZGOŠĆA

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Abstract. The study tests the hypothesis that artistic representations on some stećak tombstones can illustrate certain knowledge and beliefs from pre-Christian mythology, cosmology and religion, as well as the calendar knowledge of the Balkan Slavs. Stećaks are tombstones made of large marble monoliths. These are dated to the Middle Ages. Older researchers attribute them to the Bogumils, a religious sect whose religious beliefs are not sufficiently known, but that assumption has been abandoned. Now, it is believed that some of these were built by Christians (both catholics and orthodox), some by Muslims. Some are richly decorated with relief, some have inscriptions, written in Bosnian Cyrillic, in a language that is indisputably Slavic. Two stećak tombstones, found in the local cemetery in Donja Zgošća near Kakanj, in present-day Bosnia, are analyzed in this paper. These two are certainly not decorated with either Christian or Muslim symbols.

1. INTRODUCTION

Donja Zgošća is located in central Bosnia, north of Kakanj, on the banks of the river Zgošća. Two stećak tombstones, investigated in this paper, were found there in the old cemetery known as Crkvine, at geographical coordinates 44° 09' 17.5 "N, 18° 07' 54.5 E. The cemetery is heavily vandalized now, but, fortunately, these two stećak tombstones were transferred to State Museum in Sarajevo a long time ago. Both of these are richly decorated with relief.

2. GREAT STEĆAK

The stećak is made of marble monolith, large in size: 265 cm long, 139-147 cm wide, 146 cm high at the corners and 169 cm at the ridge. It stands on a slab about 40 cm thick, which was buried to ground level. It differs from all other stećak tombstones in the fineness, precision and richness of its construction. It is oriented east-west (Truhelka, 1933, p. 12), All its surfaces, except the upper one, are decorated with relief. Because of its beauty and artistic achievement, it is

considered to be a monument to either a ruler or a high priest. There is no consensus among scientists about the time when it was made and it is not known who was buried under it. Radioisotope dating of the mortal remains of the deceased has not been done.



Figure 1: Western side (anti-facade) of the Great Stećak.

At the western side¹, we can see twelve rosettes, arranged in four verticals, consisting of three rosettes each. This can be understood as four seasons of three months each, which make up a solar year, therefore, as a symbolic representation of the calendar. That is why we should look at the facade, facing east:

The façade of the large stećak tombstone from Zgošća seems to illustrate the verses of a folk poem from the collection of Vuk Karadžić (*Women's Folk Songs*, Book 1, Poems Nos. 81 and 78):

O, Durmitor, o high mountain!
A white city was seen above you,
And above the city THREE SUNS were shining...

Vuk Karadžić (*Women's Folk Poems*, Book 1, Poem No. 78)

¹ Most of the photographs of the stećak tombstones were taken from the book by Alojz Benac, and Oto Bihalji-Merin (1964), when these monuments were in a much better condition, before the acid rains and before the experiments of the conservators.



Figure 2: The eastern side (façade) of the Great Stećak.

This is exactly what we see on the facade of the stećak: a city above a palisade of logs with a gate. Above the middle houses of the city, three rosettes are clearly visible, which can be understood as three Suns.

There was a belief among Serbs that three Suns were shining in the sky once. Nenad Đ. Janković wrote about it (1951, p. 38) referring to Vuk Karadžić and Simo Trojanović. Belief in the existence of three Suns, according to the same author, has its basis in the atmospheric appearance of parhelia. Christian books do not mention the trinity of the Sun, so this visual representation can only be understood as a remnant of the old religion of Balkan people.

In the collection of Vuk Karadžić, there is another variety of the poem that mentions those three Suns, which begins as follows:

O, Vitor, o high mountain,
Above you, THREE SUNS were rising ...

Vuk Karadžić (*Women's Folk Poems*, Book 1, Poem No. 81)

Mount Vitor does not exist in the Balkans. However, Christian missionaries who baptized the Slavs of Polab and Pomerania in the twelfth century AD mention the hill of Vithora, which was located above the city of Arkona, on the island of Rujan (today's Rügen). In the town of Arkona there was a temple of the four-headed Slavic God Svetovid (Swantevit), known on Balkans as Vid. The same missionaries also gave a description of the statue of Svetovid (Vid), which had four heads. That gave us the idea to look for Svetovid on this facade as well:

Three human figures are standing at the city gate and the fourth human figure can be seen hidden, in the first house on the left in the city. (The image is not sharp enough, but the right hand one of the three figures on the gate seems to hold in its right hand some round, hollow shape, resembling a ring.)



Figure 3: Ring in the hand of the first character on the right.

The representation of the ring is not a rarity on Herzegovinian stećak tombstones, on the contrary, we see it quite often, especially on those from Radimlja near Stolac, and it can also be seen in the hand of the famous idol from Zbruč, which is one of the few preserved visual representations of Svetovid. There are whole groups of such stećak tombstones, which depict a hero with a powerful, large either right or left hand, over which is a ring. The ring is obviously important. Why?



Figure 4: A detail of the stećak from Radimlja.

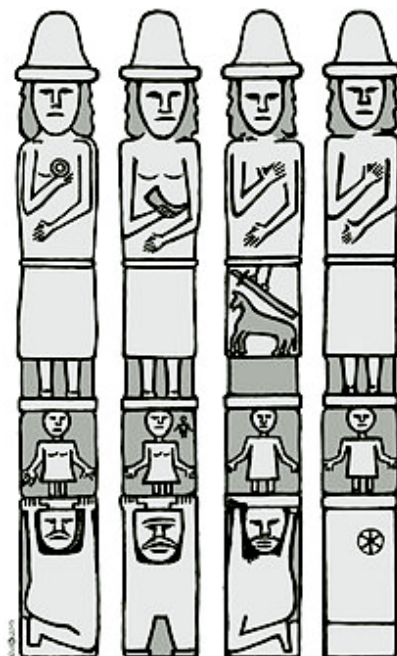


Figure 5: Four sides of the idol of Svetovid from Zbruch: one of his aspects has a ring in his hand.

The palisade below the city is very interesting: at first glance, it looks like a mountain, but that's not all. To the left of the gate, it consists of six logs (or posts), which, going towards the gate, grow in length. There are as many of these on the right side of the gate, a total of twelve, but starting from the gate to the right, their height is getting smaller. These could be associated with the twelve months in a solar year. If the gate represents the summer solstice, then the length of the logs illustrates well the length of the solar day in certain months. This reinforces the assumption of the calendar significance of the stećak tombstone. Therefore, we should look at the other elements on the façade:

On the "lower floor" of the façade, two horses can be seen, with human figures between them, but the stećak is damaged there, so it is not possible to determine how many of these figures there are. The left horse is without a rider, while on the right one a small human figure seems to be riding on the horse back and it looks like a child. (If there were three characters in the middle, then the total number is again four, if there were only two characters in the middle, then, with a small rider on the right horse, there are three in total.)

Of course, we should look at the north side of the stećak, in order to check this interpretation:

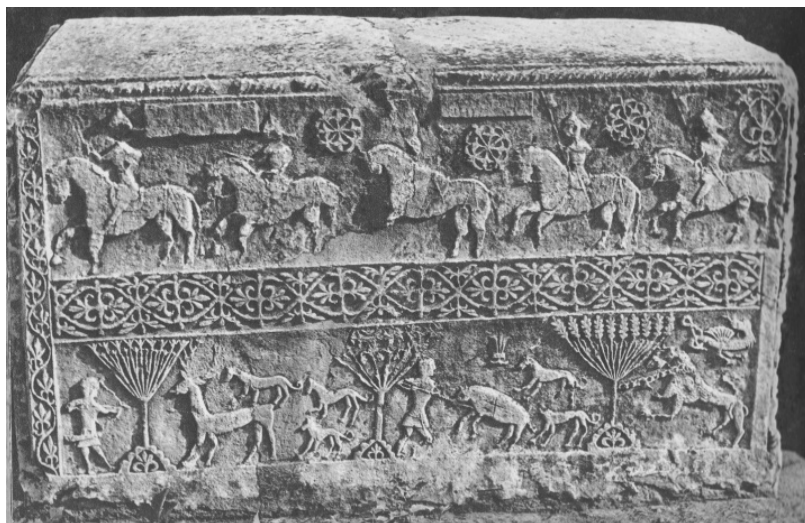


Figure 6: North side of the large stećak tombstone.

We will first look at the upper half of the northern side of the stećak, which is separated from the lower one by a border frieze. We can see five horsemen. Each of them has a hat:

The first of them is a bit bigger than the others, so it is probably more significant. It was marked with a plaque, on which there was an inscription once, which is known to have been intentionally destroyed (carved out) in the seventeenth century. The face (or faces) of that rider was also destroyed, which could mean that it was especially important.

Following the leading one, we can see three horsemen, each one with a rosette above. They are marked with a common plate from which the inscription is also destroyed. The second one of those three riders was damaged, only a part of his left leg along with buttocks and his sword can be seen, as well as a part of his right arm with a spear. Rosettes above the riders can signify three Suns.

The last rider is not marked by a nameplate, but his identity is revealed by the iris flower which is above him. It could be Perun, the Slavic God of Thunder. The Serbian word for iris, *Perunika*, is derived from Perun's name.

Thus, we get a "formula" that could interpret the four-faced Svetovid, who in the Balkans was called Vid.

Vid (quaternity) = Triglav (Trinity of the Sun) + Perun (the God of Thunder)

According to what we know about Svetovid (Vid) so far, he was the God of light, Sun and war. Saxon Gramaticus informed us in detail about this, in his work "Gesta Danorum." The same author stated that the festival of Svetovid was celebrated in the temple in Arkona "just before the harvest." It means that it was the time of the greatest power of the Sun. If we wanted to determine more

precisely the day of the greatest power of the sun deity, it would be the summer solstice, when the day is the longest, and it is "just before the harvest."

On the lower half of the stećak's north side three scenes are depicted: deer hunting²; wild boar³ hunting; a wolf, chained to a tree. The third one reflects the popular belief that in the World of the Dead there is a large tree (oak or hawthorn) to which a wolf is chained. The beast gnaws that chain, threatening to free itself. The moment the chain is almost broken, Christmas comes, someone shouts "Christ is born" and the chain is good as new again. There is also a belief that this happens when a gypsy blacksmith strikes his anvil with a hammer (Čajkanović, V, 1924, p. 132). Since the wolf, according to Carl Gustav Jung⁴ (1943, p. 349), is a symbol of death and rebirth, the last scene almost certainly shows the world of the dead, which is confirmed by the above-mentioned folklore. Since Christmas is mentioned in that story, we realized that the scene also refers to the winter period. A dragon is above the wolf.



Figure 7: Stećak tombstones at the original location, the old cemetery in Zgošća.

² Deer hunting is a very common motif on stećak tombstones (Miletić, N: (1982), p. 74) and a favorite topic in mythology. Deer are often hunted in Serbian folk poem, most often in ritual wedding ones. King Arthur, from the Welsh myth (*The Story of Geraint, son of Erbin*) hunted a white deer on a holiday called Sul Gwyn, (meaning "white Sun" or "holy Sun"), which is the Welsh name of the summer solstice. Deer hunting was also found on Thracian frescoes. The deer symbolizes the Sun of the first half of the year, youth, the ruler himself and ritual purity. After sacrificing a deer, the ruler acquires the right to marry. In the calendar, the Sun ceases to be "young" from the summer solstice, the hot days of summer go by. The ruler is mature and in his full strength.

³ Wild boar hunting is known by the myths of many peoples. Hercules hunted the wild boar, it is one of his twelve feats; the Vedic Indra hunted the wild boar, Emuza; King Arthur hunted the wild boar Twrch Trwyth (in *The Story of Kilhwch and Olwen*). South-Slavic folklore has not preserved a single story about a powerful hero who hunted a wild boar, but it is known that on Christmas even today it is obligatory to eat pechenitsa, ie pork roast, which may indicate a ritual sacrifice of a boar for the winter solstice.

⁴ Karl Gustav Jung, (1943) *Psihologija i alkemija*, Naprijed, Zagreb, II izdanje, 1983. (C.G. Jung, Psychology and Alchemy).

The trees in this part of the stećak can be identified: deer hunting takes place next to a pine tree, the coastal one, with a wide canopy in the form of an umbrella. The wild boar hunt takes place near the tree from which the leaves are missing. The wolf is tied to an oak, the leaves of which have a quite recognizable shape.

Given that the figure of a deer hunter is just below the figure we thought to represent Svetovid, whose holiday was celebrated just in time of the summer solstice⁵, we thought that a gnomon placed in the right place would be missing, whose shadow would "fall" on the first rider and deer hunter on the day of the summer solstice, at sunrise. Thus, this stećak tombstone could also have its practical use for determining the calendar. The assumption of the existence of a gnomon was confirmed: in the immediate vicinity of the large stećak tombstone from Zgošća, at the original location, there was another stećak tombstone, known as the Pillar from Zgošća, which is suitable to be a gnomon because of its shape. That stećak is also in the State Museum in Sarajevo.

This photograph is one of several preserved, showing both Zgošća stećak tombstones, in the original location.

3. THE PILLAR FROM DONJA ZGOŠĆA

This monument is also made of marble monolith, large in size. Its total height of about 300 cm. Its upper part is in the form of a four sided prism, Its cross section is rectangular, 54 x 44 cm, and its height 100 cm. The lower part of the pillar has a height of 200 cm, of which about 60 cm is buried in the ground. We can say that because of the absence of the decorative elements. The edges are cut at an angle of 45°, so its cross section is a slightly flattened octagon. The total height of the part above the ground is about 240cm, together with the transition zone between the upper and lower part, of which the lower, narrower part is about 140 cm. We notice that this height is approximately equal to the height of the side edge of the large stećak tombstone (146 cm).

The following photo shows the Pillar from Donja Zgošća, which is now also in the garden of the State Museum in Sarajevo, as well as the Great stećak tombstone. The term "original location" is only conditionally correct, because both these stećak tombstones were obviously moved there, and the large one was seriously damaged (vandalized) by somebody who was looking for buried treasure a long time ago.

⁵ Saxon Gramaticus, who in his work "Gesta Danorum" gave a precise description of the temple of Svetovid, near the town of Arkona, on the island of Rujan (today's Rügen), literally says that the festival of Svetovid was celebrated "just before harvest." The same author states that Charlemagne burned the Temple of Svetovid in the 8th century for the first time and imposed on the Rujans the Christian cult of Saint Vitus (from Sicily), whose holiday was fixed for June 15 instead of the one of the Slavic God. At that time, the Julian calendar was exactly six days behind the natural, solar calendar, which would mean that the holiday was exactly on the summer solstice day.

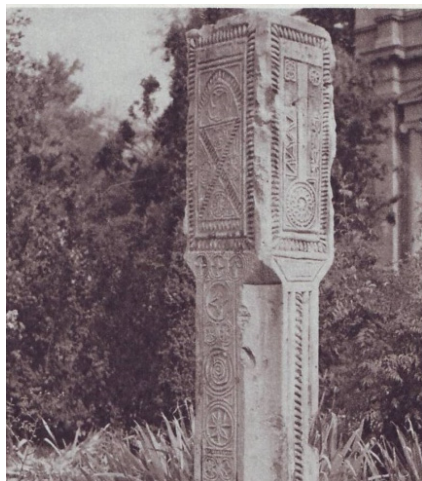


Figure 8: The Pillar from Donja Zgošća.

The pillar-shaped stećak is sloping (see the figure no. 7), probably on the side where somebody was digging, probably with the same goal. At the same time, a part of its ornaments was buried in the ground, which means that it "sunk" more than it should.

Nevertheless, the joint photograph from the original location shows us that the two stećak tombstones are in some spacial relationship. The north side of the large stećak tombstone (the one with five riders and a deer hunter) faces the pillar-shaped stećak. According to the position of the shadows, we would say that the large stećak was oriented east-west. The same was stated by Dr Ćiro Truhelka, the former director of the State Museum, in his description of these stećak tombstones.

It is possible to place the PILLAR so that its summer solstice shadow covers the first rider, his nameplate and a deer hunting scene in the moment of sunrise. It should be located at an azimuth of about $56-57^{\circ}$ in respect to the northeast corner of the large stećak, at any distance. When the first ray of the Sun appeared on the summer solstice, the shadow of the pillar would cover the first rider, his nameplate, as well as the entire scene of deer hunting. This all applies to the case that the horizon is plane (0°), about which there is no precise data, because no astrogeodetic survey was performed on the site. According to available photographs, the northeastern horizon is approximately plane.

If the pillar was positioned at the azimuth of $56-57^{\circ}$ in respect to the front edge of the large stećak, we can see that the matching is complete. The shadow of the pillar will, at sunrise on the summer solstice, cover the entire scene of deer hunting and, above it, the first rider, the one who was marked with a special plate. (We have already assumed that the plaque read "Svetovid.") At the same time, if

the pillar is placed at the appropriate angle, its distance from the large stećak is completely irrelevant.

This solution corresponds very well to the position seen in the photo from the original location.

There is another detail on the Pillar, which speaks in favor of the calendar significance of these monuments:



Figure 9: A detail from the Pillar.

These two lines on the pillar intersect at an angle of 67° ($2 \times 33.5^\circ$), which is the exact angle of the total shift of the sunrise point from the summer solstice to the winter solstice, at this geographical latitude.

All these calendar symbols on this pair of stećak tombstones are hardly a coincidence. The pattern on the Pillar shows four small rosettes (a qaternity) together with a unifying element (a larger rosette with a four-pointed star). Therefore, we should look at the other (southern) side of the large stećak tombstone from Zgošća to check all this (See figure 10).

The symbolism is similar to the symbolism seen on the north side, only this time we need to look from right to left. Again we can see five horsemen in a row, by the bottom of the stećak.

The first one is obviously different from all the others, he rides in the opposite direction from them and has a "Tree of the World" above him. This horsman is exactly opposite to the one we marked (on the north side) as Svetovid. Everything fits again, the Tree of the World is always tied to the supreme deity⁶. This horsman is directed from east to west, as befits a solar deity.

⁶ An oak tree is dedicated to Zeus, an ash tree called Igdrasil to the Nordic Odin, and an oak tree to Svetovid.

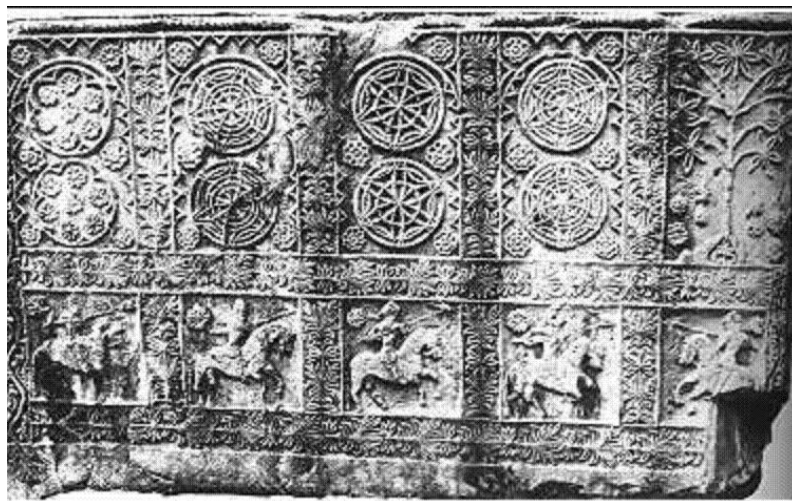


Figure 10: The south side of the Great Stećak tombstone.

The next three horsmen have, in the corner of the square in which they are located, one small rosette each in the shape of the Sun and two more in a rectangle above, in total, THREE each (three months of one season).

The last rider in the lower left corner has an iris flower in a square, and the flower wreaths are in a rectangle above him, arranged in two rosettes (not "Sun Wheels," but rosettes composed of flowers). Again, he could be identified as Perun and is located right behind the rider we marked as Perun on the opposite side of the stećak. This side of the stećak contains the same "formula" as on the one we commented on earlier:

Perun (thunder God) + Triglav (Trinity of the Sun) = Svetovid (quaternity)

All the symbolism of solar numbers exists on the large stećak thumbstone from Donja Zgošća:

12 - as twelve months of the solar year

3 - as THREE SUNS and TRIGLAV and three months in a season

4 - as four seasons and the quaternity of SVETOVID (VID)

The symbolism of visual representations also corresponds to the solar cult.

There is also the Tree of the World, so important in solar religious systems; There is also the iris plant, as Perun's sign; There is deer hunting (summer solstice); There is also wild boar hunting; There is a WOLF, a symbol of death, chained to the TREE OF THE WORLD – AN OAK; There is a DRAGON, a symbol of FIRE.

All this defines these two stećak tombstones as a unique calendar monument, closely connected with the observation of the sky and the determination of the cardinal days of the year (solstices and equinoxes).

Neither of these two stećak tombstones, neither the large one nor the one in the shape of a pillar, present any convincing Christian symbol, as well as Muslim ones: no cross, no crescent moon. The symbols, carved on the surface of these two monolith marble blocks can be "read" by following the old religion⁷ of the Balkan Slavs, its iconography and mythology.

Looking carefully at the large stećak tombstone from Zgošća, we did not find any traces of the lunar calendar. If it is a calendar, then it is purely solar.

4. PARALLELS

There is only one stećak, very similar to the Great stećak. The construction is the same and the individual elements of its relief are closely resembling, both stylistically and symbolically, with those on the Great Stećak. Therefore, there is a high probability that they were carved by the same master, at approximately the same time. This stećak tombstone has not been published, so there is no available information about its original position. Now, it is located in front of the Kakanj Municipality building.



Figure 11: Stećak tombstone from the vicinity of Kakanj.

⁷ We were NEVER claiming that all the stećak tombstones are pagan. We know that there are some of these with clear Christian symbols, as well as with clear Muslim symbols. Christianization of the inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina was completed only by the end of the tenth century, when the Narentians (Neretljani in Serbian) were baptized by force, after they had been defeated in a war with Venice. It seems logical that remnants of the old religion can be expected a couple of centuries later, especially at remote places.

Three horsemen can be clearly seen, corresponding to those three on the stećak from Zgošća marked with a rosette, i.e. the trinity of the Sun. Above them, there is a border freeze of 12 three-leaf clovers, which is associated with 12 months of the solar year. The opposite side of the stećak should also be seen:



Figure 12: The human figure feeds the dragon "out of hand".

You can see a human figure, feeding a winged snake (dragon) out of his hand. This is probably Perun (the master of celestial fire, symbolically represented by the dragon). Again, he could be the fourth member of the quaternity, an aspect of the four-faced Svetovid. The facade of the stećak looks like this:



Figure 13: Facade of the stećak tombstone - unifying figure with a bow, an arrow and a ring.

We will look at another stećak, in the shape of a horizontal slab.



Figure 14: Stećak tombstone from Lištica.

Slab-shaped stećak tombstones are considered to be the oldest (Wenzel, Mariana 1962, 102-143). This one, shown in the previous picture, was found in Lištica, in Western Bosnia.

The crescent Moon is clearly visible, which is why it can be thought that celestial bodies are shown on it. There are also three larger rosettes, which can be understood as three Suns, just like on the Great Stećak from Zgošća. There are also three swastikas. Swastika is an ancient symbol of the sky, which would support the previous assumption. There is also a unifying symbol, a three-leaf clover, which can signify the unity of the three Suns (like Triglav). Next to the Moon's crescent is probably Venus, in the shape of the morning "star" Danica, or the evening, Večernjača, shown as a smaller rosette. It is astronomically true that Morning star (Danica) can be near the waning crescent only, while Evening star can only be near the waxing crescent Moon. It is always close to the Sun, at a maximum elongation of 47° .

Christianity was not very interested in the Moon (except when calculating the date of Easter). It was not interested in Venus either and certainly did not understand the Sun as triple. The visual representations on this stećak are a part of a different cosmology.

CONCLUSIONS

Sources for the study of the pre-Christian mythology of the South Slavs obviously exist, both in folk literature and in monuments of material culture. Within these sources, one can search for (and find) both knowledge and beliefs about the sky, celestial bodies and the structure of the world, as well as the calendar knowledge. Vuk Karadžić, in the second edition of his Dictionary (1852, under S), states that the people in the vicinity of Imotski call the stećak tombstones "Old Feith Stones" ("Kamenje Starovirsko"), which can also point to the old, pre-

Christian faith of the Balkan Slavs. At the creation time of the stećak tombstones, the autochthonous Romanized Illyrian population had been assimilated long since. There are no traces of the Illyrian language on these monuments. There is no Latin either.

An interpretation is good if it explains a large number of phenomena. Unfortunately, no one has researched either the symbols of celestial bodies or traces of pre-Christian cosmology and calendar knowledge on stećak tombstones so far. Therefore, it is not possible to cite multiple references for interpretations given in this paper.

Since being placed under the protection of UNESCO, stećak tombstones have become a "sensitive political issue" between Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks. Issues of origin and identity are never resolved without emotions, often exaggerated.

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